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THE RUINS OF INDIAN CHURCH IN BRITISH HONDURAS.

BY REV. F. DE P. CASTELLS, BELIZE, BRITISH HONDURAS.

In September, 1902, I had the good fortune of being able to visit the settlement of Mahogany cutters at the point known as "Indian Church" (in the northern section of this Colony), near the New River Lagoon. The New River runs from about the centre of our western boundary, traversing the lagoon mentioned, and empties into the Atlantic Ocean at Corozal, near the entrance of Chetumal Bay. Its total length is nearly a hundred miles, and it is navigable for the greater part of it.

Naturally enough, my first inquiry was about the aboriginal name of this district; but herein I failed, for none could be discovered. The aborigines, or "Indians," still living in it speak Maya, and when consulted, answered that the place had always been called *Ichinchech*, which, obviously enough, is an attempt to imitate the sound of our English name.

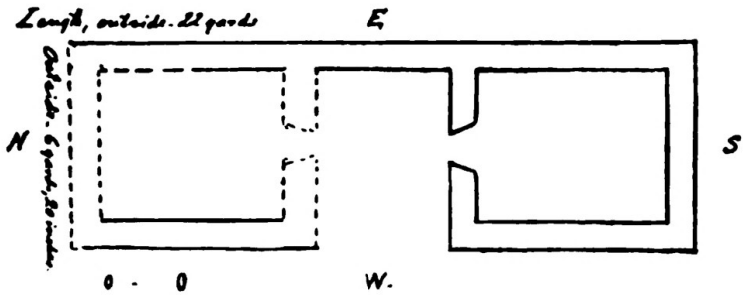
Assuming that the name was designed to signify (*for I had no positive information*) that in former days there had been somewhere near by a church or temple of some sort, I proceeded to investigate whether there remained any ruins, works or other relics, of the old building, and in this I was fortunate, for Mrs, Dewgard. the owner of the Mahogany Works, knew all about it, and immediately gave me two guides, who took me to the precise spot, opening up a way through the bush with their machetes as we went along. This good lady stated that the few people who have seen the ruins had the idea that the building had originally been a "Roman Catholic Church." But the idea is utterly preposterous, and I can only account for it by the ignorance that prevails concerning the aborigines.

Once on the spot, I at once sought to reproduce on paper the plan of the building, and as this was so easily done, a copy of it is appended as illustrating the brief remarks that will follow. As a matter of fact, one has only to glance at the plan and observe both the divisions and the measurements, to see clearly that the building was not designed to shelter any considerable concourse of people and could not, therefore, have been used for worship by a Christian congregation.

An old Maya-speaking Indian living in the neighborhood, by name Kulluth, assured me that when he was a lad (probably sixty years since) the structure was still almost entire save for the roof, of which no traces existed even then. On the other hand, the cleaving of the walls through the centre suggests that it is tumbling down from extreme old age. The mortar used for it, which is still fairly hard, has preserved its whiteness, but this is from the abundance of lime which it contains, this

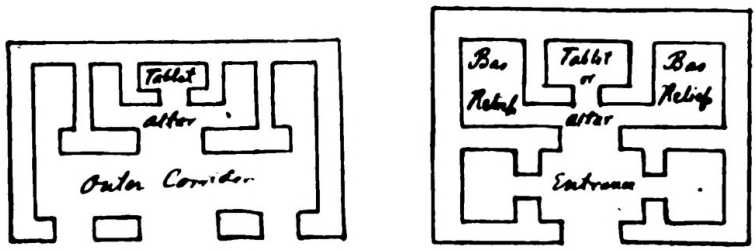
latter material being very plentiful in that vicinity. The stones employed by the builders are unhewn and of very irregular shapes. The thickness of the walls is really remarkable, *one yard and five inches throughout the building*, and this even for the partitions. It is impossible to ascertain their original height, but the highest portion of the wall now extant is fully sixteen feet above the ground; the top is broken, so that it may have been much higher, which would account for their extraordinary thickness.

The two side rooms had wide doors, it is evident from the stones projecting out of the upper angles of the entrance of the side rooms as they have sockets into which the corner points of the doors would be inserted, so as turn in and out. At this entrance, the wall is cut aslant, so that it widens toward



Plan of the Temple at Indian Church.

British Honduras.



Temple of the Sun at Palenque Ancient Building at Oscuinga

the inside. The central apartment which was the sanctuary proper, and faced the declining sun, has no such sockets, so that it may be doubted whether it ever had any doors at all. On examining the debris in the interior, I observed four large circular stones, which were evidently loose sections of pillars; they must have belonged to the sanctuary, for they still are there, with only one exception; their dimensions are: diameter, 17 inches; length, 21 inches. At first sight they look like barrels of cement that have become petrified by moisture; but one of them has split open through the centre, and shows it to be real stone. These pillars may have stood at the main entrance supporting a lintel, which would then imply the existence of a door, as we find at the Castle of Chichen Itza; but (as was also the case with two columns in the latter place) they may have stood in the inner room to support the large beams of the roof.

but whatever their position they were probaly symbolical and may have been inscribed upon.

At present we cannot discover any traces of windows, if any ever existed, or of any mural decorations; but in the south apartment, and on the west wall, there is a peculiar cavity or niche shaped thus ∩, the measurements being: width, 24 inches; height, 28 inches; depth, 20 inches, this latter being just half the thickness of the wall. What this could have been used for, it is hard to surmise. It seems very unlikely that it was a common shelf; it may have been a receptacle for the ritual vessels, or for the sacred books, that is, the records which the priests had to consult to determine the oracle.

Just outside the Temple, near the northwest angle, there are two raised blocks of stone, which are very conspicuous, and through the difference in size, recall those used by some primitive tribes for marking the limits of a grave, the large one showing where the head lies, and the small one the feet. At Indian Church the large one is 46 inches above ground, 28 inches broad and 12 thick; the second (*fifty inches further away from the main entrance*) stands 10 inches high, is 17 inches broad and 10 inches thick. Both these stones have the surface too uneven to be taken for altar-tablets, probably they were intended to mark the periods of 24 years (*ahau katun*), which the builders of the temple passed as an organized community settled in that locality; similar stones have been found in Mayapan, Zilan, etc., and this was found to be their object.

That the building was really an aboriginal temple, is, therefore, made over-evident; but in considering the matter we should not overlook the tangible proof which is afforded by the resemblance of its plans to that of other aboriginal shrines in settlements anterior to the Spanish Conquest. Like most oratorios it contains three divisions, stands on an eminence commanding a broad view of the surrounding plain, and is situated at a point accessible by water; the actual distance from the edge of the water is about ninety paces, the ground sloping down so as to make the ascent very easy.

Ahout a quarter of a mile to the north of the Temple, that is, going down the river, there is a large mound, now overgrown with high brush, but no one has ever attempted to open it. Similar ones exist further away, going down the river. It is hard to imagine what these mounds could have been for. It is said that they form one continuous chain stretching to the end of Chetumal Bay and at intervals varying from six to twelve miles, altogether for a distance of "nearly 150 miles" of the coast line. The top of the mound at Indian Church is covered with a multitude of stones suggestive of ruined constructions. The people also spoke of "The Rock" at Stone Bank, where potsherds, axe heads, and other aboriginal implements, have been found, and of which I obtained some samples. Carved stones have been brought to light, but have not been taken

care of; no one was able to say whether these latter contained any inscriptions, or glyphs, but the probability is that if any had been discovered they would not have been recognized as such by those people.

I attach some importance to these ruins, and have made them the subject of a careful study, mainly because they happen to be situated in that part of Central America which is best known to archæologists. My idea is that excavations around and inside this Temple, as well as at the other places mentioned, would yield some results. As both the New River and the Hondo flow down from Petén, Indian Church lies on the way to the Yaxhaa Lake, where ruins of some importance are known to exist, and also shows the course taken by the Indians when they abandoned the coast.

The above description would not be complete without a few words as to the historic significance of the ruins, and this can only be determined by the consideration of other data. The author of "Mounds in Northern Honduras" (XIXth Ann. Report Bureau of Am. Ethn.), speaking of the buried edifice which he found at Santa Rita, near the mouth of the New River, says it was the work of "the Toltecs," who, according to him, had also "founded Palenque, etc.," and assigns it to "somewhere between the end of the twelfth century and the end of the fifteenth"; he being of the opinion that it was destroyed by the same people, either because of an evil augury at the close of a cycle, or else for fear of desecration by the Spaniards after their occupation of Bacalar.

Now, it seems clear that the two temples, though unlike in form and construction, have a common origin. Of the one in Santa Rita it is said the stucco of the paintings had been twice renewed, which means that it was *at least* two cycles, or 104 years, old. The writer might properly have gone a step further and added that counting this from the last Feast of the New Fire (when such renovations as he refers to, took place), that is to say, from A. D. 1507, we are led back to A. D. 1403. But it might have been built sometime between two cycles, and was most probably built at the commencement of the preceding one and then, if so, the dates would be: for the two renovations, 1403 and 1455 A. D.; and for the erection of the Temple, A. D. 1351.

Again, if the destruction of this Temple was due to the advent of the Spaniards, the dates of their various expeditions must be considered. The first to land in this portion of the continent were Valdivia and his fourteen companions, wrecked off Cape Catoche in A. D. 1511, all of whom were made slaves; then came Hernandz de Córdoba, in 1517, who landed at the same place, but was repulsed by the Indians; the first attempt at conquest was made by Alonso de Avila, who came in 1527, but the task was such a hard one that it was not accomplished until 1545, when Gaspar Pacheo undertook it in a more thorough

way. Ancoa, the historian, states that from 1517 the people began to emigrate inland and the stream of migration increased considerably after 1545. Assuming that the presence of the Spaniards were the cause for the desertion of the Santa Rita Temple, this last date should be the true one; but it would seem that the real motive was the alternative given above.

It has been said that the Temple was built by "the Toltecs." But who were the Toltecs? A great deal is attributed to them, but as a matter of fact there are very conflicting accounts of them; and as for Palenque, or Xibalba, and Lorillard City, far from having been built by the Toltecs, they were the work of an older race, who abandoned them because of the Toltec invasion. Nay, further, it was the advance of the Toltecs (otherwise called *Nahuas*) into lower Yucatan that brought about the abandonment of the settlement at Santa Rita.

About the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a feud between the Chan Santa Cruz Indians, of Central East Yucatan, and the Chichenhaas, who occupied the region to the south of the Hondo River. At that time the Chichenhaas claimed sovereign rights over the northern district of this Colony, and as late as 1868, they marched through it (under the leadership of the warlike Canut) to demand an indemnity of $3,000 from the people of Corozal for having supplied arms and ammunition to their foes; which demand, however, was not enforced because of the sudden appearance of their enemies on the scene. Now, this feud was not a new thing, but the inveterate and traditional hatred of two antagonistic races. Which races? It is true that they both spoke Maya; but the Chan Santa Cruz were genuine Toltecs, while the Chichenhaas were Itzaes, the descendants of those who in early days had built both Itzmal and Chichen-Itza, but who, when the Spaniards came, had been driven south and organized a new kingdom, with its capital in Petén.

The struggle between the aboriginal element and the advancing Toltecs is most interesting. The Toltecs encroached on the aborigines by degrees, yet for a long time both races lived in close proximity in the same territory. But in 1460 there was a confederation of chiefs, who took Mayapan and destroyed it, and this event coincides both with the final abandonment of Chichen-Itza by the Itzaes and with their consequent migration *en masse* towards the region where in later times we meet with the Chichenhaas. This name Chichenhaas means simply "waters of Chichen," and arose probably from the fact that the people having taken possession of Petén from before the fall of Mayapan, they considered themselves the masters of all the territory traversed by the streams flowing from their new capital, even to the Atlantic coast. But, on the other hand, when the Spaniards arrived, Chetumal and Bacalas were already in the hands of the Toltec Mayas (if we may so combine the names), and, consequently, the conclusion we

come to, is: 1st, That the abandonment of Santa Rita was due to the continued advance of the Toltecs; and 2nd, that the time of it was the conclusion of the cycle (*either in A. D. 1455 or A. D. 1507*), when the priests were expected to forecast the events of the next cycle.

One other circumstance that commends this explanation of the burying of the Santa Rita Temple is, the incompatibility that there was between the religious creeds professed by the Toltecs and Itzaes. The former had a gloomy religion, with human sacrifices, full of bloody mysteries; whereas the Itzaes were a sort of Druids who practised neither human sacrifices nor idol-worship. As the reports were continually coming, of the gradual spread of the Toltecs in Yucatan, the Itzaes would fear desecration; and so, when the cycle came to an end, the time having come when the priests should consult their oracles regarding the next fifty-two years, what more natural than their prediction of new invasions, and the advice to retreat by the only way open to them—the river?

It is this that explains the origin of the other Temple at Indian Church. After those people would have gone seventy miles up the stream, they would probably consider the picturesque plain to the east of the lagoon as a safe spot on which to settle and there, therefore, they proceeded to build a temple which, though much simpler in form and construction than the one left behind, would answer the purpose just as well, at least for a time. The building has nothing remarkable in the way of architecture, and the plan is a crude one, but under the circumstances described, those people would not dispose of very great material resources, while during the period of 200 years and more that had elapsed since their defeat at Chichen-Itza, the race must have gone on declining in every respect. We cannot tell how long this settlement lasted, but if the two stones outside represent two periods of twenty-four years, they would then bring us down to A. D. 1555. Only four years later would be the Feast of the New Fire when, Sahagun tells us, *if the omen was propitious*, the work of renovation was taken in hand. By now, however, the Spaniards had conquered all Yucatan, and the Toltec Mayas were once more on their heels, fleeing from the conqueror, as they themselves had had to do; and this, together with the absence of any more cyclical stones or inscriptions, leads us to suppose that the Feast of the New Fire was not kept, but that the Temple was abandoned and the people retreated still further inland.